

This 1978 *Leatherneck* file photo shows the view from the gate at Camp Hansen. The camp is named after Pvt Dale Hansen, who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions on Okinawa during World War II. (Photo by Herb Richardson)



Before There Was Camp Hansen

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

In the early summer of 1945, even as savage fighting raged between Americans and Japanese on the Shuri Heights of southern Okinawa, United States Navy Seabees of Mobile Construction Battalion 95 (MCB-95) began construction of an airfield near the minuscule fishing village of Kin to the north. When finished, the airfield was to serve as the home of Marine Aircraft Group 31 (MAG-31) for the invasion of the Japanese Home Islands scheduled for that autumn. At work around the clock, the Seabees soon had a completed airfield that boasted an 8,000-foot main runway, taxiways, dispersal areas, maintenance areas, fuel and ammunition storage areas and billeting and mess facilities fully adequate to support the needs of a Marine Aircraft

Group, even while fighting still raged to the south.

Then, as MAG-31 was getting settled into its new home, World War II ended. With no Marine Corps presence on Okinawa planned for the post-war years, the Marines packed up and returned home. Kin Airfield, as it had been designated, was turned over to the Army for whatever use the Army might have for it.

Having no particular need for an airfield, the Army determined the site was a very suitable location for a live-fire training range. Far enough away from any significant urban centers, with nothing beyond a scattering of tiny villages nearby, the area was ideally suited for firing ranges of every type. In practically no time at all,

Army engineers turned a fully operational airfield into a live-fire training area that boasted firing ranges for every type of weapon from service pistol and rifle to mortars, artillery and tanks. There were even aerial bombing ranges. Each year, the base hosted the Army Forces Far East (AFFE)/Ryukyus Command (RyCom) competition rifle matches. The base even boasted a new name—Easley Range—in honor of the Army's Brigadier General Claudius Easley, assistant division commander of the 96th Infantry Division, who had been killed in action during the fighting on Okinawa in 1945.

With the dawn of the decade of the 1950s and the beginning of the Korean War, the Army began relocating more



LCPL TANNER LAMBERT, USMC

Marines and Sailors with the 31st MEU march past Peralta Hall, the unit's command post, during a 10-kilometer hike at Camp Hansen, Okinawa, Jan. 4.



and more combat units away from Okinawa. Easley Range, the northernmost American military base on Okinawa, became less and less used. Finally, the curtain came down and Easley Range became a collection of World War II vintage Quonset huts and other assorted structures that once teemed with activity, but now bore signs warning, "UNITED STATES PROPERTY, KEEP OUT." It didn't take long for Easley Range to take on the appearance of a ghost town straight out of the Old West. That was the sight that greeted units of the 3rd Marine Division in the mid-1950s.

It was in the mid-1950s that the 3rdMarDiv began relocating some units to Okinawa from their homes on the Japanese island of Honshu. Once again, there was a need for live firing ranges, and there was Easley Range sitting quietly with nothing much to do. Inquiries were made. Would the shrunken Army command on Okinawa consider transferring what had begun as a Marine Corps airfield back to the Marine Corps? Already considered as excess by the Army, the transfer was implemented without delay. The "KEEP OUT" signs were torn down and Marines of

the hastily assembled 9th Marine Regiment's Rifle Range Detachment began moving in.

Soon elements of the 12th Marine Regiment began pounding away at hillside targets. Tankers slammed direct fires at obsolete WW II rolling stock that had been towed out into designated impact areas. Adding their voices to these shoots, the 75 mm recoilless rifles of the 9th Marines Anti-Tank Company threw high explosive, armor-piercing rounds at the long out-of-date tanks and amphibian tractors that dotted the hillsides. Marine and Navy aircraft became frequent users

Left: A view of the seaplane base while it was under construction in 1945. Inset: An aerial photo of Naha Naval Air Base, Okinawa, April 30, 1954. (Photos courtesy of National Archives)



of Easley Range's aerial bombing ranges. The rifle range was back in full-time business as requalification details filled the tent area next to the long disused crushed coral main landing strip of what had begun as Kin Airfield.

Duty at Easley Range, isolated though it may have been, was considered a choice assignment by members of the Rifle Range Detachment permanently stationed there—almost a form of self-employment—even if conditions were a bit Spartan. Taken all together, Easley Range presented a rather disturbing picture of a hobo jungle somewhere along

the Northern Pacific railroad tracks. Quonset huts that had been a uniform green had degenerated to a scabrous hue that defied any placement in the normal spectrum. Additional living spaces were provided by box-like structures known as Dallas huts. A Dallas hut featured exterior and interior siding to about waist height with screening that closed in the remaining area to the corrugated tin roof. Outside shutters could be lowered to keep a Dallas hut from becoming an impromptu shower during those rainy days that were a feature of Okinawa winters.

Rain was indeed a fact of life on Okinawa. In February 1957, rain fell for 19 days. No, it didn't rain *on* 19 days, it rained for 19 days. Rain fell steadily—everything from a soggy drizzle to a knock-you-down torrent. Rain fell to such an extent as to give Marines cause to wonder if the time-honored Marine Corps adage that holds “It never rains on the rifle range” may be wrong, and that it really does rain on the rifle range. Holding a sight picture is a bit difficult when the target at which you are attempting to fire becomes so water-soaked that it falls completely off the carrier.



PFC KEVAN DUNLOP, USMC

A Marine sights in during rifle qualification at the range on Camp Hansen, July 9, 2018.

Quonset hut or Dallas hut, winter heating was provided by that old Marine Corps standby, the oil-fired potbellied stove. Winter at Easley Range was more than likely one of the few places on earth where the sleeper needed both two blankets and a mosquito net. Hardy little devils those Okinawa mosquitoes.

Chow at Easley Range was fairly decent, especially if you had a yen for SOS, or creamed beef on toast, at breakfast each and every day of the week. Most rifle range Marines developed at least a tolerance, if not a liking, for SOS. A Marine had to eat something somewhere, and except for the rifle range mess hall, there was nothing anywhere.

Life at Easley Range may not have been bucolic, but it did have its moments. For the rifle range Marines, there were moments such as the day in the autumn of 1956, when several rifle range personnel, poking about in the backcountry, came upon a cave filled with WW II Japanese artillery ammunition that had sat undisturbed since 1945. Explosive ordnance disposal

personnel from 3rdMarDiv headquarters examined the find and determined that since all those explosive items were in a cave, detonating them on site would pose no possible harm. Of course, there was quite a collection of explosive devices in that cave, enough to start a fair-sized revolution. The resulting detonation rattled

every ramshackle structure on Easley Range and was heard as far away as Naha far to the south.

In the summer of 1957, Easley Range, begun as an airfield, recorded its final flight operation. That was when a USAF F-86D from Naha Air Base—it's Naha International Airport now—exper-

Marines from various units across MCB Smedley D. Butler participating in the Far East Marksmanship Competition fire rifles at targets on Camp Hansen, Okinawa, Japan, Dec. 6, 2018.



PFC BRENNAN BEAUTON, USMC



HERB RICHARDSON

Blacktop firing lines, as depicted in the 1978 *Leatherneck* file photo, are more practical because of torrential rains that often saturate the island.

experienced a power failure and needed an emergency place to set down immediately. With no power, the pilot needed every foot of the old 8,000-foot crushed coral runway between the 500- and 800-yard lines of the rifle range. With only the manual brakes operative, the pilot managed to bring the F-86D to a shuddering stop before he and his aircraft both ended up in Kin Bay.

As proof, if any was needed, that Okinawa lay within the typhoon zone, all permanent structures at Easley Range were firmly anchored by inch-thick braided steel cables secured to concrete deadweights buried in the coral. Was it Typhoon Emma and Super Typhoon Faye that almost blew Easley Range completely off the map? Both of them, one in 1956, the other in 1957, were real hummers with maximum sustained winds in excess of 185 mph. 1957 was the year when the only vestige of the rifle range mess hall still standing was the mess sergeant's hefty wooden desk. While the rest of the mess hall had been carried off in the direction of Kyushu, that desk, by some freak accident of nature, hadn't moved an inch.

In the late fall of 1957, a pair of civilian engineers working as defense contractors visited Easley Range with blueprints of an entirely new, modern Marine Corps



USMC

PFC Dale M. Hansen

base that would be built on the site of Easley Range. The new camp would be called Camp Hansen, in honor of Medal of Honor recipient Private First Class Dale M. Hansen who was killed in action in the fighting for Shuri Heights in 1945. By the early 1960s, Easley Range had vanished. Where Easley Range once stood there was now Camp Hansen, so familiar to generations of Marines.

Have you been stationed at Camp Hansen

since the decade of the 1960s? Were you among the multitude of Marines who passed through Camp Hansen on the way to or returning from the cauldron of Vietnam? There were always fewer Marines returning from Vietnam than going to Vietnam, weren't there? Are you by chance stationed at Camp Hansen today, and do your duties from time to time take you along the camp's main east-west street? If they did, you were walking along the site of what once was Kin Airfield's main runway, the abandoned crushed coral runway that stood between the 50-yard line and the 800-yard line of what was once a rifle range.

That was all a long time ago, and the ranks of Marines who remember Easley Range grow ever more thin with each passing year. Still, there really was something before there was Camp Hansen.

Author's bio: Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars as well as on an exchange tour with the French Foreign Legion. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.

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